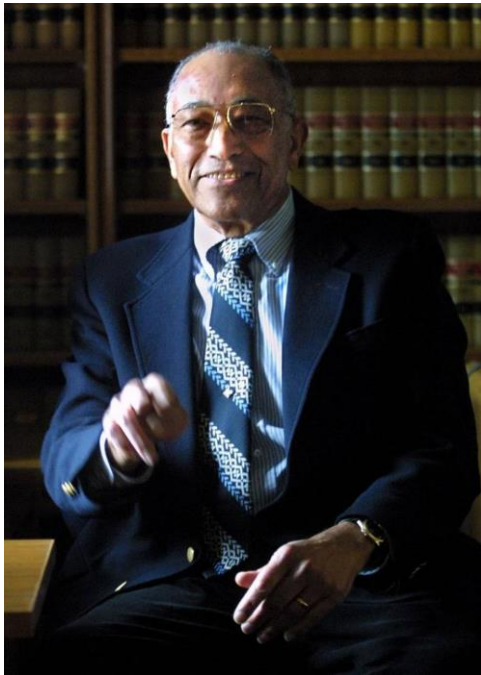


# Charles Smith left valuable blaze on trail to justice



Washington state Supreme Court Justice Charles Z. Smith sits in his Olympia, Wash., office Monday, May 13, 2002. He is the first minority judge to sit on the bench. LAUREN MCFALLS Associated Press file, 2002

THE OLYMPIAN EDITORIAL BOARD  
September 2, 2016

Charles Z. Smith was the first African American to serve as a justice on the Washington state Supreme Court. His death on Sunday at the age of 89 was a sad passing.

Smith was indeed a true giant in the state legal profession, as one colleague put it. Others described him as eloquent, brilliant, and a trail blazer.

For years he was the lone minority on the Supreme Court and his interest in and advocacy for diversity and social justice was strong. In the 1960s and '70s he was active in the fight for reparations for those Japanese-Americans interned during World War II . He retired from the high court in 2002 at the mandatory age of 75.

It is telling that after graduating from law school at the University of Washington in 1955, Smith could not land a job with a Seattle law firm but did get a clerk's job at the state Supreme Court, the first African-American to do so.

By 1961 he was hired by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy as a special assistant helping to investigate corruption in Teamster union pension funds. From there, he rose through the legal ranks as a Seattle municipal court judge, superior court judge and eventually a high court justice. Along the way he was appointed to judicial positions by both Republican and Democratic governors.

State Supreme Court Judge Steven Gonzalez credits Smith with serving as “a mentor to hundreds of people of color.” Smith had encouraged Gonzalez’ own interest in the law, as well as helping his campaigns for judge in King County Superior Court and the high court, according to a detailed news obituary by reporter Mike Carter of the Seattle Times.

Smith could be surprisingly humble and approachable despite his status. Chief U.S. District Judge Ricardo Martinez called Smith a trailblazer and hero. U.S. District Judge Richard Jones said his grace, humility, fairness and moral courage made him a role model for judges.

Being first was almost a way of life for Smith. A Florida native, he grew up in a segregated world. He served as a court reporter for the Army Air Corps during World War II. He graduated as the only African American in his class at the University of Washington law school in 1955; he later would serve as an associate dean at the law school.

Years after Smith left the bench, women have become the majority on the high court. Appointments of Gonzalez and Judge Mary Yu have brought two fresh minority voices — and sharp legal minds — to the high court.

A person of Smith’s temperament and background would be valuable on our court today, given the tensions between the criminal justice system and minorities.

Smith’s passing reminds us that more diversity is needed in court system still dominated by whites. But progress can and is made.

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